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# Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus (1834)

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## Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (1834)

One would not expect *Sartor Resartus* to make the list of favourite Scottish novels: lots of people wouldn't even call it a novel. It is an uncouth gallimaufry of poetry and satire. But it has strong claims to be considered one of the most influential Scottish works ever written. One cannot imagine American literature without it. Both Emerson's *Nature*—the essay that stands at the portal of American literature's sudden nineteenth-century surge—and the greatest American novel, *Moby-Dick*, manifest a debt to Carlyle from their opening pages. The opening chapter of *Moby-Dick* is pure Carlylese.

*Sartor Resartus* also set in motion a language of cultural interrogation that makes up part of the originality of *Walden*. Carlyle gives, for example, a succinct critique of war: how thirty young men may be plucked from their villages and transported thousands of miles away to be drilled and made to stand in front of thirty young Frenchmen similarly positioned, and then prompted to shoot at these other victims—"Had these men any quarrel?" asks Carlyle. No, they "were the entirest strangers," but now "in place of sixty brisk useful craftsmen, the world has sixty dead carcasses." In similarly vivid imagery, Thoreau rewrites the picture of the New England economy as the slavery of property, young men forced in the name of prosperity to "push" the dead weight of their mortgaged barns along the dusty road of their lives.

Or consider Carlyle's chapters on "Aprons" and "Symbols" alongside Melville's discourse on revelation in "The Whiteness of the Whale."

In all these instances, there is a spiritual questioning of appearances, inherited from the German philosophers, uniquely combined with a boisterousness of language inherited from the English Bible and the Scottish vernacular. Until Joyce (who also owes a debt to Carlyle), the sheer rambunctious strength of the modern English language as displayed in *Sartor Resartus* remains unused, although Carlyle's own debts to Swift and *Tristram Shandy* are well known. Like both those authors, he pushes at the boundaries of the genre he takes up, and it may be for that reason that the English canon does not know quite what to do with *Sartor*.

The ambitions of Carlyle himself as a novelist were stymied by the state of publishing in the early 1830s, when urgent Reform Bill politics suppressed the market for all literature: he was forced to publish *Sartor* in

periodical “bits” in *Fraser’s Magazine*. Still, *Fraser’s* was the premier monthly magazine of its day, so the bargain with the devil was not without its benefits. *Fraser’s* was itself dominated by the wit and learning of the Scots and Irish and notorious for its raucous masculinity. Dickens and Thackeray both looked to *Fraser’s* as a model for their writing, so it could be argued that *Fraser’s* and *Sartor Resartus* are at least as formative of the great nineteenth-century novel tradition as the work of that other Scottish Romantic, The Great Unknown. Carlyle, as much as Scott, channeled an innovative mixture of German Romantic philosophy and Scottish vernacular boisterousness into English (and American) literature and thereby revitalized its traditions.

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